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LEFT OR LEFT BEHIND?: HELLER AND FEHER ON THE PEACE MOVEMENT

by Brian Martin

Doomsday or Deterrence? by Agnes Heller and Ferenc Feher. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1986. 160 pp.

Brian Martin teaches science and technology studies at the University of Wollongong in Australia and has long been active in the radical science, environmental, and peace movements. He writes that "normally I would not have paid much attention to such a book, but a Marxist friend of mine impressed upon me the seriousness with which Feher and Heller are treated in certain left circles." We are publishing the review for the same reason that Brian Martin wrote it.—The Editors

One day a few years ago I chanced to meet an acquaintance on the street in Canberra, Michael Denborough, who happens to be one of the founders of Australia's Nuclear Disarmament Party. Immediately he asked me, "What have you been doing to help save the world?" At first I thought he was joking. But he was completely serious. Nuclear disarmament for Michael was an urgent day-to-day issue.

A few experiences such as this are enough to convince me that Ferenc Feher and Agnes Heller are tackling an important issue in scrutinizing doomsdayism in the peace movement in their book *Doomsday or Deterrence?* Many of their observations and conclusions are penetrating, though in saying this I am undoubtedly biased since, as a peace activist and researcher, I have developed some similar views myself.

Yet in my opinion, this book is singularly unhelpful to peace activists and is likely to mislead those on the Left trying to understand the peace movement. Instead, the book should be read as a lesson in what happens when leftists forsake left-wing tools of analysis.

the basis of an historical tendency of capitalism in this direction." (p. 160) Similarly, the joint-production problem presented by Steedman in *Marx After Sraffa,* in which it is presumably shown to be technically feasible for production to occur with negative values and negative surplus value, demonstrates in Itoh's view nothing so much as "the neo-Ricardians' one–sidedly abstract, technological approach to the theory of value." (pp. 177–78) Such artificial constructions can easily be dealt with by an analysis that takes into account the "historically specific forms and mechanisms of the capitalist economy (including the role of market), which fix the allocation of labour-substance among the joint products (even though this allocation is technically indeterminate)." (p. 178) In short, Itoh is able to intervene effectively in these value theory debates simply because he (unlike neoclassical and neo-Ricardian thinkers) is able to turn to the Marxist understanding of capitalism as an historical entity.

There is of course a strange irony here. Even though it is, I believe, crucial to criticize the Uno school for its exaggerated attempt to divorce concrete history from theory within its "basic theory of capitalism," nevertheless where political-economic discussions have typically occurred on a very abstract plane, as in the case of the "transformation problem," the Uno school, and Itoh's work in particular, has the advantage over neo-Ricardian and neoclassical analysis that, in the process of abstracting from historical contingency, it never entirely loses sight of the fact that the object of the analysis is to understand the historically specific reality of *capitalism,* and not to deduce laws applicable to economic forms in general. These strengths can be traced, however, not to the Uno school's tendency to separate theory from history, but to the deeper Marxist respect for historical understanding that remains a shadowy part of its analysis.

NOTES

1. Engels in Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International, 1970), pp. 225–27.
2. See Kozo Uno, *Principles of Political Economy* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980); Makoto Itoh, *Value and Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980); and Robert Albritton, *A Japanese Reconstruction of Marxist Theory* (New York: Macmillan, 1986). For a critical viewpoint see John Lie, "Reactionary Marxism," *Monthly Review,* April 1987, pp. 45–51.
3. Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 90.
4. See Ian Steedman, et. al., *The Value Controversy* (London: Verso, 1982).

Feher and Heller embed their critique of the peace movement in their wider analysis of contemporary society. They begin by arguing that the "value ideas" of modernity are freedom and life and show how these relate to capitalism, industrialism, and democracy. They believe that the peace movement has overemphasized the value of life at the expense of freedom. In a careful discussion of the theory of just war, they conclude that "the *conditional* use of nuclear weapons is *conditionally just,*" thereby refuting demands for nuclear disarmament. (p. 30)

In the second chapter they dispute the peace movement's assumption that nuclear war is imminent, or at least more likely than previously. The third chapter is a discussion of the strategy of the Soviet ruling elite, focusing on the possibility of Western European acquiescence to Soviet domination through "self-Finlandization" or "self-Vichyization." They conclude that the peace movement is, largely unwittingly, a potential vehicle for Soviet expansionism.

Their fourth chapter focuses more directly on the peace movement and confronts the issue of whether it is leftist. They argue that the movement's organizational structure is antithetical to "communicative-critical discourse" and hence is contrary to the Enlightment value of freedom. They conclude that "the marriage of the democratic Left and the antinuclear movement [is] not only inconvenient but, one hopes, only a transitory episode." (p. 134)

Feher and Heller see little hope for the future. In the final chapter, their most promising scenario involves a "new concept of detente" involving Western investment in Soviet societies in exchange for greater institutional freedom.

If members of peace movements were somehow induced to study this book, they would discover some challenging criticisms. Feher and Heller expose the dangers of focusing on nuclear doomsday, in particular by pointing to the possibility that other human values may be jeopardized in a drive to protect life at any price. Their analyses of the Soviet military and political threat highlight the failure of the peace movement to develop a convincing alternative to disarmament: What happens if there is an invasion? They show how it is possible that a social movement may serve, albeit without intent, the interests of powerful groups, in this case the Soviet regime.

Even if peace activists were willing to consider these challenging views, few of them would persist in reading past the first few pages. Neither the style nor the vocabulary are suited for widespread

consumption, though well-read left intellectuals will find little difficulty in following the argument.

Actually this is quite appropriate, since the obvious audience for *Doomsday or Deterrence?* is left intellectuals. Feher and Heller are clearly concerned to pry them away from their current belief that the peace movement is progressive. Given this goal, it is strange that the authors stray so far from traditional materialist analysis.

Feher and Heller make heavy use of moral categories of analysis. They analyze social dynamics in terms of conflicting values, for example seeing war as a value conflict between life and freedom, the two universal values. Their moral argumentation regularly becomes accusatory, as they argue, for example, that if "people believe" that a European deterrent to Soviet aggression is necessary but will not pay for it, "they deserve what they get if worse comes to worst." (p. 52) The collapse of social democracy in West Germany, they say, "is a justly deserved historical punishment" for previous "haughty superiority" against social movements. (p. 91) They use moral argumentation most systematically in judging various historical events involving the Nazi and Soviet governments.

Moral argumentation has a long history. What is surprising is that this mode of analysis, which is usually associated with religious or nationalistic thinking, should be used so pervasively in an ostensibly left treatment. Ironically, moral argumentation is also heavily used by the peace movement.

A second important feature of Feher and Heller's method of analysis is a heavy reliance on deductive argumentation. They regularly postulate a series of conditions necessary for something to happen, and then proceed to deduce conclusions from these conditions in a careful fashion. But they spend no time justifying the original postulates. Their extensive use of the categories of life and freedom are a prime example: They never justify their choice of these categories as the basis of analysis. In their discussion of just war, they present four scenarios in which war would be absolutely just and two cases in which it would be conditionally just, and proceed to examine them and draw conclusions. (pp. 23ff) But they provide no explanation for these six cases. Their discussion of four social preconditions for nuclear world war follows a similar path (pp. 37ff), as does their explanation of the growth of the peace movement in terms of three social developments. (pp. 108ff)

Deduction and induction are complementary intellectual tools, both useful. Where Feher and Heller diverge from the usual formula

is in their failure to either motivate or justify their postulates or to reexamine them when they are unable to explain certain events. Leaving postulates unexamined is characteristic of systems of dogma. Again religion springs to mind.

The authors explicitly reject traditional class analysis based on economic categories, especially in their analysis of Soviet systems. So where do their concepts come from? Mostly they do not say. But it does not take long to see that their analysis of nuclear politics draws heavily on concepts which are congruent with those of conventional strategic theory.

Strategic theory is centered around states as actors in the international system. The states are assumed to be unitary: internal clashes and contradictions do not affect their behavior. The actor-states are assumed to be rational and to use this rationality to serve unitary national ends. Finally, the concept of deterrence is treated as central to inter-state dynamics.

Feher and Heller make every one of these assumptions, though they do not spell them out as assumptions. They treat states as actors, only occasionally distinguishing between national elites and the population and analyze state actions in terms of rational behavior serving national ends. One reason they believe that nuclear war is unlikely is that governments do not want nuclear war; accidental nuclear war for them is "science fiction." (p. 38) The collapse of the distinction between state and people is expressed in their language. For example when they are discussing whether "people are not ready to use the weapon," the "people" are not distinguished from national policymakers. (p. 32)

Rejecting traditional class analysis, Feher and Heller have instead adopted the categories used by Western military and national policy analysts. It is no wonder that their conclusions are very similar: defend the West against the Soviets using the threat of military force, and nuclear weapons if necessary.

Thus they seem to have assumed boundaries of discourse similar to those preferred by proponents of the arms race: either support the West and use Western strategic concepts, or support the Soviet system and use (Soviet-serving) class analysis. Feher and Heller assume that because the peace movement is not in the former camp, it must be in the latter.

Yet there is available a wealth of thinking and action that goes beyond these approaches. This is not the place to go into details, but suffice it to say that many peace activists and writers are receptive to a

variety of critiques, including critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, the state system, state socialism, and the domination of nature.

It is in their discussion of the peace movement that Feher and Heller's analysis is at its weakest. Their characterization is simplistic and reductionist and seems to be based on a very limited reading of selected authors.

Throughout the book they represent the peace movement as subscribing to the motto "better Red than dead." Yet there is no evidence that more than a small minority would agree with this slogan, or even agree with the assumption that the choice is between Red and dead. It is Feher and Heller, through their dichotomy of life and freedom, who have asserted that the slogan is characteristic of the movement.

They also make little differentiation between the antinuclear movement and the peace movement, taking little notice of the movement against nuclear power. While many in the peace movement focus on nuclear weapons, there has remained an influential core concerned with the wider issues of militarism, non-nuclear armaments, challenging the social institutions underlying war, and linking these questions to other issues.

The authors also misjudge the dynamics of the movement in saying that its strategy is predominantly based on the rally. The rally is only one of a wide variety of methods and organizational forms found in the movement. These include small action groups, caucuses, direct actions, letters to newspapers, and working in education, government, and corporations.

Feher and Heller show no awareness of the extensive literature on social movements and peace research which could have provided an antidote to their one-dimensional picture. They rely on a few writings from a few selected authors, such as E.P. Thompson and Mary Kaldor, and use these plus a few (unrepresentative) slogans to make sweeping generalizations about the nature of the movement. Most peace activists, I suspect, would laugh at the caricature if it were not presented so seriously by writers ostensibly on the left.

It is not hard to find more useful, if more prosaic, studies which better explain the dynamics of the peace movement. Nigel Young's account of different traditions of the movement in "Why Peace Movements Fail" and Bob Overy's perceptive historical critiques are good places to begin.[1] These studies are grounded in actual social and political circumstances, deal with the difficulties of organizing oppositional groups, trace bandwagon effects and the inevitability of

movement decline, and show the influence of dominant institutions and historical events on the strength and form of the movement. While not Marxist, these writings are much closer to a materialist analysis of social movements than Feher and Heller's approach which, with its foundation in value conflicts, is closer to idealism. Feher and Heller also prefer to discuss history in terms of personalities (such as Stalin) rather than the dynamics of structures.

Their account leaves out much of interest in peace movements. The Eastern peace groups, and Western peace movement support for them, get little mention. The strategy of promoting unilateral initiatives is overlooked in their constant focus on unilateral disarmament. They fail to address the vigorous debates within the peace movement, emphasizing instead its alleged philosophy of "better Red than dead." Their admitted ignorance of the history of the peace movement (pp. 106–107) shows in assertions such as "until the end of the 1950s, the only international *organization* with an antinuclear profile was the World Peace Council," ignoring the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the War Resisters League.

Occasionally there are short or extended passages which seem to be at odds with the overall analysis and conclusion. This may be a consequence of joint authorship which has not been smoothed out in the final text. For example, there is a laudatory passage on the philosophy of nonviolent revolution, referring to Gandhi and others. But it ends abruptly with the statement that this model cannot "serve the purposes of Western antinuclear movements and trends, for it is suited only to conditions of political tyranny." (p. 34) They appear to be unaware not only of the long tradition of nonviolent action, but also of the key role played by both the concept and practice of nonviolent action in the peace movement as well as other social movements in recent times. Of course, recognizing this point would require reconsidering their entire critique.

Later in the book there is a long and quite perceptive account of the nature of contemporary social movements (pp. 122–131), which is sensitive to the ways in which these movements, through their structures and orientations, challenge the patterns of establishment discourse and power. But this analysis is suddenly terminated with the introduction of an alleged peace movement slogan, "nothing is worth dying for," which they reject on the grounds that just war must remain permissible. Feher and Heller reject the peace movement by applying their moral categories to what they present as a monolithic

movement. An analysis in terms of the actual dynamics of peace groups would make this sort of dismissal impossible.

I would have thought that this book would severely damage Feher and Heller's credentials as left intellectuals. After all, they reject class analysis and fail to use any other sort of structural analysis, proceeding instead with moral categories and concepts from Western strategic theory. Furthermore, they come up with a conclusion identical to that of defenders of Western military power: use military force, including nuclear weapons if necessary, to defend Western democracies from the Soviet military threat. Even their occasional criticisms of Western support for oppressive regimes are not greatly different from those of many liberal intellectuals.

The peace movement, and the left, deserve better than this. Perhaps it is appropriate that only a few of them will be tempted to struggle through *Doomsday or Deterrence?* I am afraid that when Michael Denborough asks me about helping to save the world, I'll have to think up my own answer.

NOTES

1. Nigel Young, "Why peace movements fail," *Social Alternatives,* Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1984), pp. 9–16; Bob Overy, *How Effective are Peace Movements?* (London: Housmans, 1980). See also Nigel Young, *An Infantile Disorder?: The Crisis and Decline of the New Left* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).